

Introduction

Freshman year of college is a pivotal year of development for many young adults. Not only is a time of increased independence and learning, but it is also a time of experience and discovery. First and second year students on campus are entering a world that is often very different from anything they have previously experienced. New friends are met and exciting relationships grow accompanied by new viewpoints and ideas. University residence hall, in particular, offer a unique opportunity to live with many new people. In contrast with, say, apartment living, dorm life is a more communal experience with staff and personnel available to encourage interaction among residents. With community dining halls and planned floor activities, residence halls engender relationships that may not have necessarily formed among different circumstances. In an ideal situation, the people present on a floor or the larger residence hall would represent a wide variety of cultures, beliefs, and attitudes. These differences, which in other situations might hinder interaction, may be explored in a safe and structured environment. Thus, diversity in dorm life is an invaluable experience and should be encouraged as much as possible.

Richard J. Light has done research concerning diversity in university housing and his book, *Making the Most of College*, is an intriguing look into Harvard University's undergraduate housing. His study has many good points that are worth noting and are applicable to many schools. While what works for Harvard will not necessarily work for every university, the study sheds light on some important aspects of diversity on campus that are pertinent for universities nationwide. One section of import is Light's discussion on college as a unique situation in which cross-racial interaction is particularly accessible (2001: 131-133). College is a time where new students get to experience diversity on a level that might not have been present before. Students

often come from homogeneous communities in terms of race, religion, and/or wealth, and for many freshmen, university residence halls will be the first real and prolonged exposure to different backgrounds. This new diversity has the potential to afford interaction with differing groups where it may have otherwise not existed. Another interesting conclusion Light comes to is that college is a place that can facilitate relationships across racial, ethnic, and religious lines due to the ability of students to assume a certain level of similarity. He insists that on a college campus, specifically a selective one (as mentioned before Light did his study at Harvard), students are able to infer certain characteristic commonalities among the student body. For example, most students at Harvard, as light points out, are there because of a dedication to academics and a diligent work ethic. Students at college universities are often of comparable intelligence and thus communication becomes easier regardless of differences in background. When students are able to assume a certain similarity interaction becomes much easier, and it can be the key difference in cross-ethnic interaction. Taking Light's study into mind, it seems that diversity in residence halls becomes even more important as it may serve as one of the few chances for safe, sustained, and in-depth interaction among students from a variety of backgrounds.

Methods and Data

Over the course of my semester's worth of research I conducted eleven face to face interviews with students living in university residence halls. The sample of students was a convenience sample that surveyed students who were available and willing to participate. These students resided in Babcock Hall of the Pennsylvania Avenue residence hall block. Students were approached and asked if they were willing to participate in a brief interview concerning their

experience in the dorms and were then asked a series of questions based on their experience in university housing.

These questions dealt with two main aspects of housing I wished to explore: the application process and the experience of diversity in the hall. For instance, students were asked, in addition to demographic items, whether or not they received their first choice in housing, what influenced their decision concerning what three residence hall blocks they would apply to and what order, and whether they knew their roommate before applying for housing. These questions were created in order to get a sense of what goes on during the application process. I wanted to know what factors were responsible for the make up of the residence halls (i.e. why some students live at one location versus another).

In addition to those questions students were asked certain questions about diversity and their attitudes and experiences related to it in university residence halls. Students were asked whether or not they felt that their floor and/or hall was diverse, whether they felt that cross-racial interaction occurred in their hall, and what benefits and drawbacks they could foresee with increasing diversity in university housing. With these questions I hoped to gain a better understanding on what students' perceptions were with regards to diversity in living quarters.

Of the eleven respondents, all of which were freshmen living in university housing for the first time, seven were female and four were male. The breakdown in terms of self-defined race or ethnicity is as follows: two Latina/Hispanic, three Black/African-American, three White/Caucasian, two Asian, and one multi-racial individual.

Diversity: Benefits and Drawbacks

Why is diversity important? As was touched upon earlier, diversity in a undergraduate residence hall can give a person invaluable insight into other cultures, religions, and attitudes. Students can learn vital life lessons that can help them enter into a potentially diverse world outside of college. Intolerance, while still prevalent, lacks forward thinking and inevitably leads to isolation and fear. When a person accepts differences for what they are and can respect them, then mutual benefit is to be had. However, when fear wins out and intolerance fosters, the communication, and the benefits, cease. Thus, real and prolonged exposure to differences at a time in a person's life when they are still shaping and reforming thoughts and opinions is crucial. In the words of one student whom I interviewed, "Being an African-American, the world is not all black. I need to learn how to deal with certain people, not only their race, but also their attitudes" (personal interview, 11/13/2007). These words show an impressive grasp on what might be expected of a student when they exit college.

Diversity has many other benefits besides prepping a student for their post-collegiate life. In my interviews students listed a variety of reasons spanning a wide range. One individual mentioned that interacting with students of other backgrounds may help dispel stereotypes a person might hold and another felt different viewpoints and beliefs helped shape a heterogeneous community in which students could learn a lot from each other. One student put it particularly eloquently when she said, "diversity is fun" (personal interview, 11/13/2007), and, indeed, it can be. New and different opinions can add a variety to life that can be difficult but rewarding. Fun may be a simplistic way of looking at things, but it's certainly no stretch to say that learning about others can be a fruitful and enjoyable experience.

The question now becomes, is diversity worth fostering, or even forcing? How far should a university go to create diversity in its residence halls? It is a question worth exploring that has

good points on either side of the argument. Creating a diverse community can be a difficult task and entails efforts on both ends. In a university setting, for example, the administration can do its best work to make sure different ethnic groups are present in a residence hall, but ultimately it is up to the students to create a diverse and accepting community. Mere exposure does not necessarily make a community, or residence hall, diverse and while on paper a population may appear diverse, in practice the group may, in fact, be very segregated. Proponents of increasing diversity have similar arguments as mentioned earlier. They believe that learning from other cultural and ethnic groups leads to invaluable lessons and reduced hostility. While it may be difficult to argue against the benefits of heterogeneity, there are, in fact, valid questions brought up when one begins to suggest forced integration. Many people argue that forcing groups together is not the answer and that mere exposure does not necessarily improve intergroup relations. In addition, some who defend self-segregation argue that some people feel most comfortable among people of their own racial, religious, or cultural background. If diversity is increased on a residence hall floor, then the potential for a student to be the only person from his or her ethnic background increases. This isolation can have a profound impact on someone who invests much of their own self worth and pride on their ethnicity. This potential for seclusion is perhaps the most convincing argument against forcing diversity.

In my interviews I attempted to gauge University of Illinois student opinions on what they felt might be benefits and drawbacks to increasing diversity in university residence halls. In addition to simply charting attitudes, I also asked the students to give their opinions on whether or not forcing diversity, in the form of random housing assignments, would be okay and what potential consequences were. In general, students responded positively to the idea of increased diversity in university dorms, but when faced with the difficult question of how far the university

should go to create diversity and whether random assignment was a reasonable solution, the group became more fragmented. The theory behind random assignment is that if students are placed into random halls with no respect for preference and no knowledge of race or ethnicity, numerically the diversity levels will increase based on probability. While students conceded that this was true, they questioned whether it was a viable solution. One student, for example, said, “it (random assignment) would work, but it would not be okay to make a student stay somewhere that they might not feel comfortable” (personal interview, 11/13/2007). This student went on to say that students are often uncomfortable even when they get to choose their living situation, and taking away that option for students increases the likelihood of a student being unhappy or uncomfortable in their living situation. Another student brought up the interesting notion that with the preference system in place, students are able to, in some ways, move into a situation that they may have prepared for and know they will feel secure in. This student cited learning communities as one case and there are other examples on campus as well, such as substance-free dorms. As overwhelming as the response was concerning random assignment, students still felt that the university should put forth efforts to increase diversity in residence halls. What form this undertaking should assume students were unsure of, but nevertheless, as one student put it, “...diversity as an idea is good, acting on it is good” (personal interview, 11/13/2007).

Research and Revision

My research concerning housing segregation at the University of Illinois has undergone a great deal of revision over the course of my investigation and the seemingly simple picture has proved itself to be utterly complex. However, this is not to say further research is either fruitless or unnecessary, but I will touch upon that later in this discussion. My initial suppositions concerning

housing segregation were related to the admissions process and I perceived the culprit to be an advanced payment fee required when placing requests for housing. My theory was that poorer, more often non-white families who lacked the financial freedom to place housing deposit before hearing back from all other college options were being relegated to less “desirable” housing complexes. More affluent students could, in theory, place their request for housing while still looking at other universities. One fundamental flaw in my thinking was the lens through which I observed housing segregation. I, a white, upper-middle class suburban student had always perceived the Champaign residence halls as preferable. This makes sense because all of my experiences before coming to the University of Illinois centered around those residence halls: my parents lived in Bromely Hall and all of my friends lived in what’s colloquially known as the “six-pack”. These experiences led me to believe that these were, in fact, the desirable housing units on campus and, as a result, I failed to take into account other people’s preferences.

However, once I began to look at other people’s perspectives it became clear to me that something else was going on. I soon realized that not all students found the Champaign residence halls to be desirable, and that a variety of factors came into play when a student chose their housing preferences. After meeting with members of the housing department on campus the it became apparent that self segregation was to blame for the informal division among residence halls. According to a staff member of the department, the majority of students are, in fact, getting their first preference when it comes to housing, and interestingly enough, the numbers are comparable across racial lines. Thus, white students are getting their first choice as often as black students as often as Latino students, and so on. This has led me to believe that students are self-segregating themselves, and this suspicion was only confirmed when a Latina student told me that during a summer introduction program she attended before coming to the university, a mentor told

her which housing to choose because, according to the guide, her people lived there (personal interview, 11/13/2007).

Conclusions and Limitations

The most definitive conclusion I am able to draw from my research is that there exists some form of self segregation among University of Illinois undergraduate residence halls. The extent to which it occurs and what driving forces may have led to this arrangement would be the subject of further research as I cannot conclusively describe the intricacies of this phenomenon. Unfortunately, due to a small sample size that came strictly from one residence hall, I am unable to make generalizations about the campus populations based on my data. The minimal amount of ethnographic data combined with my own personal experience and data received from the housing department has led me to the conclusions I have come to, but to say that my ethnographic data is generalizable would be false. However, this is a beginning to a more in-depth look into the self-segregation occurring in University of Illinois residence halls and it is my hope that this research may serve as a basis for further research.

Thus, it is my opinion that further investigation is necessary and I would suggest a few different routes to look into. One element that I would have liked to pursue further is the manifestation of high-school relationships in college. Of my eleven interviews, none of the students had known their roommate before coming to the university, but it is my suspicion that many incoming freshmen choose to room with someone they knew from their high-school. I think that this is an important occurrence to explore because, as I have contended previously, students coming to college have the unique opportunity to meet a wide range of students from diverse backgrounds. It is my opinion that these high-school relationships can potentially stand in the way

of a student's ability or tendency to reach out and meet new people. I believe that it would be an interesting research study to follow these relationships and chart their manifestation and endurance in college.